

The Flood That Changed Vermillion Forever

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Editor's Note: information compiled from "Life in Vermillion Before the Flood of 1881 and Shortly After" (A.H. Lathrop); "The Vermillion Story" (Everett W. Sterling); "History of Vermillion and Clay County South Dakota" (Elizabeth T. Smith); Dakota Republican Newspaper; and the Vermillion Plain Talk Newspaper.

The winter of 1880-81 would be one for the record books in Vermillion and Clay County.

In the rural areas, harsh weather began to take its toll during the third week of October. A five-day snowstorm brought heavy losses of cattle and hogs as well as considerable property damage.

The Missouri River was frozen solid by the middle of November. Teams were crossing the river at an unusually early date. By Christmas, coal was in short supply.

Heavy snowfall in February put fuel in short supply. By early March, many farmers were using corn for fuel. The Vermillion flour mill was using willow wood.

The local newspaper reported on February 10 that the 30 inches of snow on the ground was the heaviest accumulation in the history of the territory.

By the time March 1881 rolled around in Vermillion it had already been a long, historic winter. The snow was as deep as ten feet in many areas, ice on the Missouri River was three-feet thick. Trains were not running do to the snow.

As the residents wished for spring, little did they know that the warming temperatures would create havoc in the community and change the city of Vermillion, forever.

The spring thaw that year came first to Montana. The waters from the thaw reached Yankton and Vermillion before the ice locally had a chance to melt and breakaway. In mid-March, a 10-foot rise over the frozen Missouri at Yankton became a cause for concern. According to newspaper reports the general feeling was that the expanse of the bottom land between Yankton and Vermillion would provide enough area for the waters to spread.

Instead, the water from upstream led to ice gorges in several places, including one at the mouth of the James River. When this gorge gave way, water and ice began to pour over the river bottom.

An ice jam formed on the night of March 27 at Vermillion. The waters from upstream began to run into the streets at about midnight. The Baptist Church bell sounded the alarm as townspeople fled to the hillside and the bluff.

Before all the residents reached safety, the water had risen to three feet on the north edge of Vermillion. Boats were used to rescue those who heard the alarm too late.

Over the next few days, water continued to rise. Residents returned to their homes only in an attempt to salvage some of their goods. Little could be done to prevent looting of abandoned property.

By Thursday, March 31, and Friday, April 1, ice on the river began to move. A blizzard at the same time made salvage efforts almost impossible. During the day, 40 buildings were swept from their foundations, before being splintered to pieces and strewn over the ice gorge.

The river wasn't finished yet. On April 6, waters heavy with ice chunks swept through the town. Within a few hours, 56 additional buildings were carried from their foundations. Among the buildings destroyed were the St. Nicholas Hotel, the railway depot, the Congregational Church and Shafer's Store building. When the water was at its highest, it was reported more than 20 buildings were floating at the same time.

While nearly three-fourths of Vermillion was destroyed: a total of 132 buildings were totally destroyed and the value of property lost was set at \$142,260. Thankfully only six people in Clay County lost their lives to the flood.

In addition to the structures of the community, the Dakota Southern Railroad lost many miles of line. Bridges at Sioux City and Yankton were destroyed, but the bridge at Vermillion was high enough to escape damage. A freight car served as a depot until the structure was rebuilt. Rail service from Sioux City was not fully restored until May 27.

After the flood, the citizens of Vermillion made the decision to rebuild the town on top of the bluff.

Passing The Test Of Time: Still Standing In Historic Downtown



Downtown Vermillion in 2011.

BY SARAH WETZEL

For the Plain Talk

Downtown Vermillion has gone through several generations of historic buildings, especially since the flood of 1881 when the decision was made to relocate the town above the bluffs.

Though some sites have been permanently laid to rest for various reasons, 16 historic buildings are still standing and continue to be used.

The Austin-Whittemore House located at 15 Austin St. was built 1882 by Horace Austin. It was donated in 1960's by Helen Whittemore to Clay County Historical Society and renovated. Now it serves as a museum and home base of the Clay County Historical Society

The Old National Guard Armory at 111 Market St. was built in 1941. There was previously no adequate facilities to house the two National Guard Units stationed in Vermillion. The building is still being used for National Guard purposes.

The South side of 10 Block of West Main was rebuilt in brick after a fire in 1890 destroyed most of the block. The city passed an ordinance banning new wood frame buildings in the business district, hence the iconic brick look. The block still houses various businesses today.

The Bank of Vermillion or First National Bank at 1 East Main St. went through several facelifts before it became what we know as Red's Steakhouse today. It was the first bank built on the bluff built first in 1892 with wood. When fire destroyed it, the building was rebuilt in 1893 with stones and sandstone trim which was replaced in 1929 with a flat concrete front and given a single entrance. In 2009 all sandstone trim was removed and replaced with concrete.

The Old Lumber Company Grill and Bar used to be a regular lumber yard which moved from below the bluffs to the Grill's current location in 1883. The brick building was built in 1919 on part of the yard and was used for not only lumber but implements, automobiles, woodworking and hardware. It was last used as a lumber yard in 1970's.

Many businesses made use of the building. It served as a general goods store, department store, discount store, print service and health club. It was restored to near original condition in 2012 and reopened as the current Old Lumber Company Grill and Bar and is used for many local events.

The U.S. Post Office building was a long-awaited project. Postal service in Vermillion was very transient once Vermillion was moved up the bluffs. It wouldn't be until 1931 that the current post office building was completed so they had a permanent home. The postal service remains there to this day.

The Carnegie Library was built 1903 and was the first time library had its own building, previously being located in a room in city hall. A \$10,000 grant from Andrew Carnegie made it possible for the library to be built. It is currently a law office and neighbor to the present-day Vermillion Public Library.

The Baptist Church on 101 E. Main St. is one of three historic churches in downtown still standing. It was dedicated 1890 with an addition built in 1925 and provides a majestic stone jewel in the downtown skyline.

The United Church of Christ on 225 E. Main St. is another church which has stood the test of time, dedicated in 1929. It is still used for its original purpose today.

The First United Methodist Church's currently standing building on 16 North Dakota St. was built in 1920. It was built to



COURTESY PHOTO: CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In this undated photo downtown Vermillion can be seen prior to paving the roads.



COURTESY PHOTO: ARTHUR RUSCH

This undated photo shows the Vermillion downtown area prior to the flood of 1881.

house the growing Methodist congregation after several moves including the previous building being destroyed by fire in 1927. The Vermillion Welcome Table takes place here as well as the headquarters for the backpack program.

The Charcoal Lounge on 8 East Main St. was built in 1894 after the block fire the year before. It has housed billiard parlors/pool halls, bowling alleys, a women's store and a second hand store. It is currently a bar/night club.

The Grange/Waldorf Livery on 26-28 Center St. is a symbol of Vermillion's progression. There was a livery at that location since Vermillion moved up the bluff. The current structure was built in 1902 to accommodate new business from the new Waldorf Hotel opening. Has been home to several businesses, including currently Bike Plus and Dakota Decoy Company.

The Clay County Bank/Vermillion Nat'l Bank on 1 West Main St. was originally Clay County Bank, one of only two buildings to survive the downtown fire in 1890. The current structure built in 1896. The Clay County

Bank merged with its competitor to form the First National Bank of Vermillion. The building has housed multiple businesses since then, currently Amy's Whoopti Doo Hair Salon.

Nissen Building/Citizen's Bank & Trust on 25 W. Main St. was built in the early 1900's as a millinery business. Later it housed Citizen's Bank & Trust then Northwestern Bell Telephone Company upstairs. It is currently the home of The Spa at Wynie Mae's.

St. Agnes Catholic Church on 202 Washington St. was completed in 1907 in place of a smaller chapel to accommodate two parishes combining. Currently the church is headquarters of the Washington St. Arts Center, home of the Vermillion Area Arts Council. Art classes, displays and theatrical and music productions are held here.

The Clay County Courthouse located at 213 West Main St. was built between 1912 and 1913, replacing the original wooden courthouse built on the bluff in 1881-82. It still serves as the courthouse and appears today much as it did when it was built.

SPANNING THE RIVER



PLAIN TALK FILE PHOTO

The the first bridge to cross the Missouri River between Newcastle, Nebraska, and Vermillion. Prior to the bridge being built, residents had to take a 35 mile path to get across the river. In the 14 years that it has been open, it has been a major boost to the local economies. Ground was broken for the bridge in July, 2000, and the bridge was dedicated on November 10, 2001.

Spirit

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predates any human habitation.

The core of the hill is formed from a rock known as Chalkstone, similar to limestone, that was formed as calcium carbonate shells settled on the bottom of an ancient ocean and then fossilized into a large formation called the Niobrara Formation.

Most of this formation was removed by glaciers but the Spirit Mound remained with glacial deposits covering the hill.

The mound continues to fascinate geologists and biologists today as they struggle to restore the prairie to its original glory.

The restoration is just as important to animal species as it is to plants.

Referred to as a 'Sparrow Haven' by David Swanson of the Depart-

ment of Biology at the University of South Dakota, it is a surprisingly significant area for the birds, some of which are at risk of becoming endangered.

"There have been fewer studies of the importance of grassland habitats as stopover sites for migrating sparrows than there have been of woodland and wetland habitats as stopover sites, but it is likely that grasslands are just as critical to maintaining stable populations as are woodlands and wetlands for these migrants," Swanson writes in the Spirit Mound Newsletter. "...In any event, Spirit Mound seems to be a popular stopover location for Le Conte's and many other sparrows, so I encourage you to take your binoculars out for a stroll up the trail during the fall migration period. You are likely to be rewarded with a beautiful variety of sparrows."

For more information visit www.spiritmound.com.